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The Role of Social Workers in Welfare-to-Work Programs:
International Perspectives on Policy and Practice

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Running Head: comparative perspectives on welfare-to-work

Abstract

Welfare-to-work is an important arena for understanding the changing nature of social policy and practice in Australia, the UK, Hong Kong, and the United States. This article discusses some key policy and practice issues, particularly in respect of social work professional training and practice. Welfare-to-work programs focus on 'active' measures and stress the importance of 'responsibilities' for all people of working age to support themselves through employment. The programs are being implemented in different ways across these different countries but in all cases the focus is increasingly on groups of people who may require substantial levels of assistance to meet their needs and to help them find and sustain employment.

The Role of Social Workers in Welfare-to-Work Programs:

International Perspectives on Policy and Practice

Introduction

As the articles in this Special Issue have shown, welfare-to-work is an important arena for understanding the changing nature of social policy and practice in Australia, the UK, Hong Kong, and the United States. The symposium ended with a round-table discussion of the issues arising from these national case studies. In this final article we reflect on some of the cross-cutting themes that have emerged out of the presentation of these “progress reports” on welfare-to-work programs in these four countries. One of the aims of the symposium was to explore the role of professionally educated social workers in the welfare-to-work programs in these countries. In general, it was found that this role is limited. However our discussions highlighted two main areas where a social work agenda could, and should, be further developed: 1) the identification of public policy themes that would benefit from increased social work involvement with respect to policy development, and 2) the role of practice in policy implementation.

Public Policy Themes

‘Welfare-to-work’ is a shorthand term used for a range of policies aimed at getting non-employed people into paid work. While this has always been one of the objectives of social and economic policy, the current focus on paid work as the most important and central policy goal appears to represent a paradigmatic change in the nature of the social welfare systems in these as well as other, countries. The policy shifts include: 1) from

promoting 'rights' to benefits to 'responsibilities' associated with benefits, 2) from 'passive' social policy based on eligibility to 'active' social policies based on 'work first', and 3) from the 'social protection' of individuals and families with dependent children to the 'social inclusion' of all eligible citizens. These shifts represent profound changes in the nature, meaning and activities of the welfare state in the 21st century.

However, there are also significant cross-national differences in what welfare-to-work means in practice. At least three key differences can be noted for these countries. First, there are differences in the way that the target groups are defined. In the USA, it is single mothers (lone parents) who are the key target group. In the other countries, the focus is more on long-term unemployed people or on unemployed youth, and lone mothers are usually included in welfare-to-work policies but are not the most important target group. Secondly, there are differences in the extent to which compulsion is embedded in these policies. Again the USA is different, with a mandatory system in which work has indeed *replaced* welfare for most potential recipients, such that some engagement with work is a condition of welfare receipt and sanctions are applied to those who do not comply. In the other countries the extent of compulsion varies for different groups of people; generally, the highest degree of compulsion is applied to those who are unemployed, especially the long-term unemployed and other groups – such as disabled people, lone mothers, etc.- are usually included on a voluntary basis. Thirdly, there are significant differences in the 'welfare mix' in terms of public, private and voluntary sector involvement in both the funding and delivery of these services. For example, in Hong Kong the private sector has

provided funding for pilot programs, while in Australia the delivery of the labor market assistance is entirely contracted out to the private and voluntary sectors.

These differences reflect the importance of path dependency in structuring the ways in which reforms are developed and implemented. Path dependency in the development of social policies refers not only to the goals and aspirations of policy makers but also to the previous history of social policy, the nature of institutional structures used to implement social policy, and the cultural and political values of the larger society. In essence, national identities shape policy options and choices and even radical reform is a *reform* of what is already in existence. As a result, welfare provisions reflect the values of the society in which they are developed and cross-national comparisons demonstrate how social policies are defined differently in different countries.

On the other hand, our small world is in many ways getting smaller and these case studies also reflect the importance of policy transfer whereby ideas are transplanted from one country to another. This is true with respect to the ideological basis of these policies as well as the specific provisions being introduced. Research and evaluation have also been an important influence, especially for government policy leaders eager to learn from the experiences of others. However, the lessons learned by others are fraught with dangers when seeking local or country-specific application; for example, the evidence may be less than robust, the wrong conclusions may be drawn, and the importance of context underestimated.

One of the main aims of the symposium was to explore the different approaches to the implementation of welfare-to-work programs, especially the role of social workers in program administration and “case management” or “casework” support services. Again there were substantial differences across the countries. In Australia social workers have been involved in the delivery of income maintenance programs for some years, taking an advocacy role, working in community development and working with staff to improve delivery. The welfare-to-work programs have led to some redefinition of the social worker role that has emerged out of the tension between the traditional social work values of promoting personal development and autonomy for program participants and the ‘work-first’ goals of achieving employment target outcomes and utilizing sanctions for non-compliance. In Hong Kong social workers have become increasingly involved in welfare-to-work programs, partly as an opportunity to engage in welfare reform debates and poverty-related work. In the USA and the UK, by contrast, there is very little direct involvement by university-educated social workers in these programs and services are often provided by career civil servants with little or no social work education.

In making links to the wider policy context, it is clear that labor market and wage policies are very important. In the US, in particular, there is very little recognition of links between child welfare, poverty and income support systems. The UK, however, is implementing welfare-to-work in the context of a specific national anti-poverty policy goal that is expressed in terms of the elimination of *child* poverty. This means that the British emphasis, although also oriented to the “work-first” model, includes a greater focus on issues of income and well-being in work than in the US. In essence, welfare-to-

work programs in the US have lost their focus on protecting dependent children (the old AFDC, Aid to Families with Dependent Children was replaced in 1996 with TANF, Temporary Assistance to Needy Families) and the child welfare system has not yet incorporated the goal of family self-sufficiency as a key element in child protection.

And finally, it is important to assess the extent to which welfare-to-work policy developments are in tune with public opinion. In general there does seem to be public support for the 'rights/responsibilities' approach to income support programs where society values paid employment and devalues and/or stigmatizes those without work. Many people without paid work want to work and often welcome the help that they can receive under these programs. However, the extent of public support for employment obligations and the compulsion to enforce them varies across countries and among different groups of people in need (youth vs. lone mothers). In particular there are very different views about the right balance between child rearing (care work inside the home) and paid work outside the home, especially in relationship to lone mothers. Obligations for single mothers to work full time, as in USA, are likely to place immense pressure on their capacity to also provide care for their children, even if public childcare were substantially expanded.

However, there may be strong public support for other ways of defining 'responsibilities', beyond the paid work model. The concept of an 'ethics of care', for example, is based on valuing the inter-dependence of people and on the need to structure social policy to take account of the inter-relationship between care-giving and care-receiving over the life

course (Sevenhuijsen 1998). The concept of ‘social investment’ is also based on a recognition of the importance of inter-dependence among and between individuals, generations and society (Esping-Andersen, Gallie, Hemerijck and Myers, 2002). In these approaches, welfare rights are viewed as collective rights for the benefit of society as a whole and not simply as individual entitlements. Social policy is never simply a technical exercise in ‘what works’; it is always about political choices and ideological values.

Practice Perspectives

It is well-known that the professional backgrounds of persons in senior policy positions in government can have a significant impact on the multiple administrative guidelines generated to implement public policy. For example, during the 1960s and 1970s in the US, social workers held senior positions in the federal Children’s Bureau and greatly influenced the direction of service delivery and the educational funding for preparing future practitioners. A similar pattern can now be seen in Australia with respect to implementing welfare-to-work programs that are guided by senior social workers in the national government. However, today it appears that the reforms in national welfare-to-work programs in the US and UK are being implemented by senior policy officials with backgrounds in economics and political science and little experience in delivering services to poor people. Until more social workers are educated and advance their careers into senior positions in welfare-to-work programs, this situation is not likely to change. So, how might social workers be better prepared to assume leadership roles related to the critical issues of poverty reduction and work enhancement? Two practice domains seem relevant to this analysis: 1) policy practice, and 2) service delivery.

Policy Practice: Examples of policy practice can be found in the numerous policy papers generated in the UK to refine and improve the implementation of the New Deal for Lone Parents program, such as giving personal advisors more discretion in the implementation of the voluntary welfare-to-work program for single mothers. This approach to policy practice suggests that ongoing policy analysis is a form of continuous value clarification in the UK, often expressed in the form of government policy papers that provide administrative guidelines. This unusual form of review and clarification is based on a demonstrated commitment to monitoring the policy implementation process that reflects the evolving values of the welfare state.

In addition to this top-down perspective of policy practice, there is also a bottom-up view that seeks to minimize discrimination and stigmatization by collecting data from service users, especially efforts to understand the life-cycle of service users and adjust the implementation of public policy accordingly. For example, the implementation of welfare-to-work programs in Hong Kong reflects a tri-focal perspective that includes the client, the community, and government policy makers. The goals include advocating for the needs of client populations through community advocacy organizations that seek to influence the development and implementation of public policy. When it became clear that there were limits to the effectiveness of welfare-to-work programs (e.g. caseload reduction), efforts were made to establish a Poverty Alleviation Commission to address the root causes that led to the need for welfare programs.

Policy practice also involves worker discretion in the implementation of public policy, frequently referred to as the role of “street-level bureaucrats” (Lipsky, 1980). The issue of discretion is played out in multiple ways. At the front line level, it involves efforts on the part of staff employed in welfare-to-work programs to either find multiple ways to be of assistance to those in need (the social work perspective) or to find ways to limit benefits (the taxpayer accountability perspective demonstrated by government bureaucrats). Discretion is also found at the managerial level where efforts are made to either contract with local service providers who have expertise relevant to the client population or by using contracting to reduce costs and devolve policy implementation authority from the national (or state) government to community-based non-profit organizations (Austin, 2003). The use of discretion in implementing public policy at the worker levels or at the managerial levels represents another way in which values permeate the implementation of welfare-to-work programs.

Aside from involving the business community in promoting a “work first” public policy approach to helping the unemployed enter the workforce, the domain of policy practice can also include engaging the private sector in funding special programs. As demonstrated in the case of Hong Kong, funding from the Jockey Clubs represents the unusual entry of private philanthropy into the domain of welfare-to-work program design and innovation.

Service Delivery: Issues of service delivery are rooted in both an understanding of the role of work in the lives of different client populations and the role of education in the

lives of social work students. As noted in both of the articles in this Special Issue on clients with learning difficulties and those with mental illness, paid work can be a central part of service delivery and the promotion of self-worth. Similarly, the cross-over services in child welfare reflect the tensions of helping mothers who are having difficulty parenting their children while also trying to maintain employment. The role of work or employment in the lives of different client populations may not receive sufficient attention by service providers. Similarly, the collective voices of service users (advocacy organizations) provide additional challenges for service providers who are accustomed to dealing with clients as part of a caseload rather than as a population of citizens with rights and responsibilities.

Some of the most profound challenges emerging out of welfare-to-work programs relate to the education of future social workers. While there are significant differences in the ways in which social work students are educated in the countries represented by the articles in this Special Issue, the common denominator appears to be related to the two concepts of “poverty” and “work”. While an understanding of poverty has been an important foundation for the education of social workers over the past century, it is not clear how this theme appears in current university social work curricula and how extensively it is treated. While it is difficult to imagine social policy courses that do not mention poverty, to what extent does it receive attention beyond income maintenance policies and programs? While the social science knowledge base that contributes to our understanding of poverty is extensive (anthropology, sociology, economics, psychology, and political science), to what extent are social work students exposed to the breadth and

depth of this issue? Similarly, while research on low-income employment, labor markets, and wage policy has relevance for those receiving social services, how extensively are these topics treated in a traditional social work program of study?

Other areas of relevant curriculum content relate to the teaching of human behavior and the social environment (HB&SE), research, and fieldwork. With respect to the relevance of the social and behavioral sciences for social work practice are considerable, it is not clear that HB&SE courses include theories relevant to welfare-to-work programs. For example, a discussion of client help-seeking behaviors can be expanded to explore the research on job-seeking behaviors. Similarly, both client identity formation and worker identity formation are involved in the process of assisting unemployed people find and sustain work. Both clients and workers are shaped by their experiences with employment. In addition, the organizational factors involved in implementing welfare-to-work programs are significant for both the client and the workers. For example, when does coercion operate under the guise of empathy? How are decision-making styles affected (e.g. enforcers or enablers, trust-seekers or trust-builders, worthiness testers or empowerment promoters, social history seekers or champions of future possibilities)? As noted earlier, worker adaptations are captured in the research on “street-level bureaucrats” and are also referred to as “managerialism” in the British and Australian context when it comes to understanding the impact of business concepts on public sector programs. And finally, the multiple theories from different disciplines about the nature of work in our societies are central to a social work student’s understanding of human behavior and the social environment.

Beyond human behavior and the social environment, all social work students are exposed to the importance of research methods. In some programs, students are expected to conduct an independent piece of research. It would be interesting to find out how much of this research each year addresses issues related to welfare-to-work programs. It is suspected that very few students pursue this area of research. Similarly, when it comes to selecting fieldwork learning opportunities, it is estimated that very few of them select welfare-to-work programs. In the UK this might be explained by the fact that local authority social service agencies have no responsibility for the national welfare-to-work programs, therefore providing little incentive for students placed in public or voluntary sector organizations to learn about welfare-to-work programs. In contrast, in the US the welfare-to-work programs can be found in either local county social service agencies or in state agencies related to social services or employment and training. In Australia, the learning opportunities in local welfare-to-work programs include a mixture of customer service delivery and community development (enhancing service networks through inter-agency coordination, partnership development, and micro-enterprise development in rural areas).

Implications and Conclusions

These four national case studies of welfare-to-work policies and programs provided an opportunity to explore welfare reform at a number of different levels: rhetoric and discourse, policy goals and objectives, institutional structures and change, and service

delivery and practice. This format provided a very rich agenda for analysis and discussion.

It is clear that policy makers in these countries have turned away from 'passive' programmes of cash support in order to promote welfare-to-work for as wide a spectrum of people as possible. This has meant an increasing focus on those who require greater levels of assistance to help them find and sustain employment. This is where the boundaries with social services become more apparent, but also more difficult. Those delivering these services are expected to focus on labor market outcomes, in particular job placements, but the people they are dealing with may need a much wider range of specialist support to help them find, and sustain, employment. As job brokers, welfare-to-work staff seek to reach target numbers for people placed in entry-level work and their training and institutional support are unlikely to equip them for these wider or more specialist roles. On the other hand, social workers deal with poor people on a daily basis but their training and professional development appears not to provide an in-depth understanding of poverty and unemployment issues, and the obligations and requirements of public assistance. There is a considerable research, practice and training agenda to be developed in these areas, both for those who are developing policy and those who are delivering welfare-to-work services as well as those providing general social services. For example, a future research agenda might address the following policy and practice implications and questions:

Policy Implications: To what extent are welfare-to-work programs pro-family or anti-family in their implementation? To what extent has the goal of caseload reduction been a substitute for addressing poverty reduction?

Practice Implications: To what extent is a comprehensive understanding of poverty guiding the practice of those in welfare-to-work programs, and how many of the practitioners are trained social workers? To what extent do welfare-to-work programs call for community work strategies more than traditional casework strategies?

It is clear that the contributions in this Special Issue raise important questions for the future

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